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ABSTRACT

Counseling support for adult students entering a distance teaching program at Deakin University, Australia, and evaluation of this service are described. Admission is granted to adult students without formal educational qualifications, and a counseling program provides information on the demands of university study and possible role conflicts that may arise among the responsibilities of home and family, employment, and university study. The counseling program has three components: (1) completion of admission and enrollment procedures for new off-campus students prior to beginning their studies and provision of teaching materials 5 to 6 weeks before the usual distribution; (2) an information packet on available resources, advice on study techniques, and an exercise in assessing reasons for entering the university; and (3) Saturday workshops to explore in more detail some of the issues raised in the counseling package and any other issues of concern. In 1978 there were 238 special entry adult students, with equal proportions of men and women. The men tended to be younger and felt that factors outside their control had caused them to discontinue their education; women regarded their responsibility for husbands and children as the major impediment. The 210 adult respondents found the section of the counseling package on study techniques the most helpful. It is suggested that identifying high-risk students and providing additional support is important to prevent student withdrawal. (SW)

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Distance Education, Mature Age, Open Entry and Counselling

J.E. Gough

For many years tertiary institutions in Australia have made it possible for a mature age student to gain admission without completing normal entry requirements. Most institutions restricted the number of students admitted in this way and many of them required for entry one or more subjects passed at matriculation level. This meant that such students were a somewhat select group and it is not surprising that they generally adjusted satisfactorily and performed well academically. Once such students were admitted few if any special support services were provided for them and they were the subject of little research. More recently entry requirements have been further relaxed and much larger numbers of mature age unmatriculated students have been admitted. In addition there has been increased research into not only their academic progress but their reasons for studying, their expectations of tertiary education and the way in which they coped with the various demands made of them by study, home and family and by their employment. It is not proposed to comment on the research findings beyond saying that there is a consensus that such students perform as well as or better than normal [1].

With the increased interest in off campus studies amongst a number of universities and colleges of advances education mature age students have been admitted to these programs without reference to formal educational qualifications. As with on campus students it has been concluded that they perform as well as students admitted on the basis of previous educational attainment [2] but concern is often expressed, both in Australia and overseas, at the high withdrawal rate of these students. Furthermore it is being suggested that institutions admitting such students have a responsibility to provide additional assistance by way of preparation and support. The present paper is a preliminary account of attempts to provide mature age students with a type of counselling support as they entered a distance teaching program. For the most part the present report is concerned with qualitative rather than quantitative aspects of the population being studied.

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Institutional Backdrop

Deakin University became fully operational on 1 April 1977 with a student population of 1800 full time and 600 part time students, having absorbed most of the students, staff and courses of the Gordon Institute of Technology and the State College of Victoria at Geelong. It is situated some 8 kilometres south west of Geelong on an 80 hectare site previously being developed by the Gordon Institute but also occupies four other temporary locations.

Courses offered by Deakin include a number of professional courses - Engineering, Architecture, Accountancy, Writing for the Media, Teaching, Computing and Dietetics - together with more general courses in Humanities, Sciences and Social Sciences. The six schools into which the University is organised offer undergraduate work leading to degrees (or in certain cases diplomas) in some of which an honours year is available. Research masters and doctorates are available in fields where facilities and supervision can be provided. Some post graduate diplomas are offered and course work master's programs will be developed in appropriate areas

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In brief, then, the University is occupied in servicing a considerable range of existing courses, substantially modifying a number of them and developing a range of new offerings both on and off campus.

Off Campus Studies

The Act by which Deakin was established included specific reference to off campus studies requiring the university:

> *'to provide tertiary education at university level for students attending the University and to provide the opportunity for tertiary education at university level to all qualified persons whether within or outside Victoria, by means of external studies programmes'*

and even more specifically requiring Deakin:

> *'to arrange for the provision of study centres at Ballarat and Bendigo and other appropriate places in Victoria where students taking external studies programmes can have access to library and other study facilities and can be given tutorial and practical assistance.'*

In fact off campus studies is the area in which Deakin expects to make its major contribution to university education in Victoria.

In 1978 three schools offered courses for credit towards either an arts or education degree. The unit value of these subjects ranged from one in the case of education courses to four in the case of the social science course. (The word 'course' at Deakin is used to mean a subject studied in a degree or diploma program. A three year degree normally contained twenty four semester units or equivalent.) Whilst education courses were specifically aimed at the professional development of teachers, courses in humanities and social sciences were interdisciplinary and less directly vocational. Courses offered in 1978 included Images of Man, Religious Experience, The Australian City, War and Modern Industrial Society, Curriculum Design and Development, Developmental Psychology, Individualised Learning, Introduction to Educational Research. Deakin's off campus program is characterised by high quality printed teaching materials supplemented by audio and video programs prepared by course teams for use by students both on and off campus. The materials are designed for independent study with minimal tutorial assistance and not requiring obligatory attendance at tutorials or at vacation and weekend schools. Students in their first package of teaching material receive therefore what may well be a daunting volume of material as well as being required to study the prescribed texts.

Mature Age Special Entry Scheme

As well as students who have satisfied normal entry requirements by means of the Higher School Certificate or an equivalent, admission is granted in the Schools of Humanities and Social Sciences to mature age students without formal educational qualifications. In advertising these places it was stated that preference would be given to early applicants, to people of aboriginal descent and to cases of disadvantage. Mature age students eligible for special entry were defined as those over 21 who had not attempted to qualify for university or college admission within the previous three years.

The significance of admitting mature age academically unqualified students to this program as described above is clear. Not only is it the first essay into formal study since leaving school for many of them, it is at university level and it is offered in a mode which requires them to be independent learners with access to only limited support services.

Responsibilities and Counselling

The University accepted the view that in opening its doors to people who might otherwise be denied a place because of limited educational qualifications and experience, it must accept a responsibility to maximise their possibilities of success. Accordingly a counselling program was developed which allowed intending mature age applicants to test their motivation, to learn something about the demands of university study and to anticipate the role conflicts that may arise between the demands of home and family, of employment and of university study.

The counselling program has three aspects:

1 The completion of admission and enrolment procedures for new off campus students between June and December in the year prior to their starting the course. This allows an acculturation period in which there is time for the student to organise his private life and prepare for the demands of study. In mid December final confirmation of enrolment was sent together with book lists and further information about the course. The first teaching material was sent in the second half of January thus giving the off campus student some five or six weeks advantage over his on campus counterpart.

2 A counselling package was prepared and sent to applicants - in two mailings. The first mailing contained in an attractively printed format:

   a Introductory material which alerted the student to problems an off campus student might encounter, outlined the resources available to him and in particular identified the people who would be his initial major points of contact within the university. In essence it was regarded as a bridge building exercise between the student and the University.
   b Next the applicant was helped to review his reasons for wanting to study at Deakin on the assumption that the better a student understands what is required of him and the surer he is that this is what he wants to do the more likely he is to succeed. Essentially this was to be an exercise in self analysis.
   c The third section contained advice on study techniques so that the student would be able to begin study with some basic understanding of how to go about it. This section was designed to increase the student's level of confidence in his ability to handle university study.

   When this part of the package had been worked through applicants who wished to proceed wrote for the second part of the package which consisted of sample material designed to give some indication of the nature and content of the units being offered. Applicants were encouraged to work through this material, do the relevant reading and complete any self assessment exercises. Enrolment could then be completed by filling in the enrolment form and returning it with the general service fee to the University. Throughout this period the applicant was invited to make contact by letter or telephone or in person with relevant staff

members. One of the aims of the package was that of building up in the student experience in interaction with both the materials and with University staff.

3 Saturday workshops were then held in November to explore in more detail some of the issues raised in the counselling package together with any other issues of concern to students. Workshops were held in Melbourne, Geelong and Shepparton. These workshops were open only to the mature age special entry students although the counselling package was sent to all off campus applicants.

The Students

The mature age special entry students admitted in 1978 numbered 238 with equal proportions of men and women. On the whole the men tended to be younger with some 40% falling in the 21-30 age group compared with 32% of the women in this range although the three students over 70 years of age were men. Two fifths of the whole group lived in Melbourne but more than half of the men did whilst only a third of the women were Melbourne residents. The frequency with which women gave a Geelong address was twice that of men. Whilst equal numbers of both men and women (about 60% of the total group), had engaged in studies of some kind since leaving school, the men generally had proceeded further with their formal schooling. Nearly four fifths of the women nominated humanities as their first choice and nearly three fifths of the men indicated a preference for social sciences. (Mature age special entry students were not admitted to Education courses which were designed for students with advanced standing.)

When asked to indicate factors which might be regarded as disadvantage men most frequently cited the financial status of their parents as the major factor in causing them to discontinue their education. The second major factor identified by men was ill health including not only illness or disease but severe physical injury necessitating the establishing of a new career. The third reason was that of responsibility for wives and children which had prevented them from furthering their education.

Amongst the women it was responsibility for husbands and children that was seen most commonly as the factor that prevented them from securing further education. Some of the women indicated that their husbands and in some cases their children were opposed to the wife and mother undertaking university studies. The financial circumstances of their parents were cited by a number of women as a reason for discontinuing their schooling but in addition several indicated that a more important factor was their parent's belief that education for girls was unnecessary.

Whilst not too much weight should be attached to these differences there is some indication that men viewed circumstances over which they had no control (e.g. parental finances, accident or illness) as being major disadvantages while for women it seems more frequently to be their family responsibilities and circumstances that prevented them doing what they would like to do. In addition it would seem that women may be less able to avail themselves of university education when the educational institution is at a distance.

When one looks at the reasons given by respondents for wishing to study at Deakin men and women give the same responses with a similar order of frequency. Improve-

ment of career prospects was clearly the reason most commonly cited by men in particular but also by women. Respondents often made it clear that they did not expect the qualification to guarantee a job but they did expect it to make it easier for them to advance their careers, to change career direction or just to begin a career. Personal satisfaction was the second most important reason while a number of men but more particularly women suggested that they believed a university qualification would allow them to serve the community more effectively.

In summary, the men as a group felt that they had suffered disadvantage more because of factors outside their control, were enrolling primarily to enhance their career prospects, were more likely to be younger than the group of women with more schooling and resident in Melbourne. Women on the other hand regarded their present family responsibilities as the major impediment to further education, more frequently felt they were discriminated against because of their sex, were older, with less schooling, more likely to live in Geelong but also saw a university qualification as improving their career prospects.

What the Students Thought of the Counselling Package

Some 210 mature age applicants returned the short evaluation schedule asking how useful they found the first part of the counselling package (i.e. excluding the sample units). Students spent varying amounts of time on the package, half of the respondents spending no more than an hour or so reading with the rest spending 3-4 hours in one or two sittings or alternatively spending a little time each day over several days or even weeks. It is quite clear that the majority of the group were favourably disposed towards the package as a whole particularly because it had been written especially for them in a warm and friendly tone and by people whose experience had some points in common with their own.

Overwhelmingly they specified the third section on study techniques as the most useful. Opinion was more divided about the introductory material in the first section with some three times as many positive as negative responses. The second section on decision making was seen as least useful with more negative than positive comments. However, the negative comments were often qualified by respondents drawing attention to the fact that by enrolling they had already made their decision thus making the section irrelevant.

In summary, the greatest value is placed on information about study techniques, considerable but less value on information about the institution and staff and least value on the decision making process. This suggests that the major problem for most of those students is lack of confidence in their ability to succeed and they value most highly those things that enhance their feelings of confidence and are clearly relevant to what they will be doing.

When asked if they proposed to attend a Saturday workshop over half the respondents indicated they did, a quarter indicated they would not and the remainder were either undecided or did not answer. A number of those who did not intend to attend gave as their reason the fact that the counselling package had answered their questions. Quite a number however indicated that they could not leave either their husband or children at the weekend because of their family responsibilities. Of those who intended to attend their reasons for doing so were mainly to gain more information

about the courses, staff, fellow students, study skills and about the university generally. In particular a number of them made it clear that they wanted to develop some kind of relationship with staff and students. This latter concern may indicate that for such people an off campus studies program may have to provide a reasonable measure of personal contact to be successful.

Performance

While it is too early to give more than an indication of student progress there are some points of interest. As of the middle of May some 34 students in this group had withdrawn 26 of whom were classified as deferrals having indicated that they wished to re-enrol in 1979. Of the remaining 204 students in the sample some students were at risk as 75 had not submitted their first assignment although the great majority of these had sought an extension of time and so at this date could still be regarded as 'on course'. Of the assignments received and marked only two had received a failing grade, more than half received grades between 60 and 80 per cent whilst a quarter were above 80%. Students who have submitted their work were almost all performing adequately and in many cases very well.

Withdrawing students were asked about their reasons for withdrawal. The reasons given fell broadly into two groups. The first group included problems with health, family pressures, change of residence or changed responsibilities at work. Essentially these were situational factors some of which had not been anticipated and some of which had been anticipated but the effect of which had not been accurately assessed by the student.

The second groups of reasons focussed essentially on the demands of the course, the ability of the student to cope with these, anxiety and lack of confidence.

Respondents generally felt that reasons for withdrawal in the first category were beyond the university's purview. They did suggest that in relation to the reasons in the second category the university might provide more extensive and intensive help particularly through workshops and even compulsory schools.

Comment and Conclusions

It may be pretentious to draw conclusions from a pilot project of this nature at such an early stage in the year but there is some evidence of trends and action would be required immediately if the 1979 intake is to receive any advantage.

The first point to be made is that the students making up this group do feel a strong sense of being disadvantaged as far as educational opportunities are concerned. Such feelings may well mean that they are strongly motivated to succeed. They are also often accompanied by serious doubts on the part of the individual about his capacity to succeed. Indeed the very anxiety to ensure success may impair the student s performance.

A second factor is the demands made of a student by a distance teaching program. In an effort to make it possible for even the most isolated student to undertake a university course by creating teaching materials that require no meeting with students or staff it is possible that provision for personal contact and interaction may be too limited

for some students to succeed. As indicated earlier the admission of students with little previous academic experience having doubts about their capacity to succeed and in some cases without family support and requiring them to undertake demanding university work and to function as independent learners may be a recipe for failure. Clearly the counselling package did something to remedy this situation. It is likely it did not do enough.

A third factor that suggests itself for more extensive counselling is the need for students to assess more accurately the demands made upon them by home and family and by their jobs as well as the requirements of study. This is not always easy to do because until an individual actively experiences these conflicting demands no anticipatory exploration of them makes much impact. However, there is some suggestion that students caught up in difficult situations may have opted for withdrawal without exploring the aternatives. Whilst withdrawal does not constitute academic failure it might represent a psychological failure to the individual which actually reduces the chances of success next time.

Next is the issue of university study and vocational opportunities. Respondents did indicate that although they hoped to improve their career prospects they knew the degree would not necessarily qualify them in a particular field.

Without unduly emphasising the present state of the job market some students may be disappointed in this hope. Regardless of the outcome it does point out the need to provide sound information and advice about career prospects for the graduate.

A further observation is the question of health and handicap. For some of our students an off campus program was the only way in which they could undertake university study. There are many physically handicapped in the community who are both intelligent and determined to create for themselves a more fulfilling life. A university that claims expertise in distance education may well be expected to give specific attention to the needs of the physically handicapped and to provide the extra support and facilities that will help to equalise opportunities for these people.

One can only note with regret that women seem still to be at a disadvantage in continuing their education. The attitudes of the family may be such that the woman, as wife and mother, is expected to do all she has done previously and not to allow her studies to interfere with her home duties. Her absence from the home in the evenings or at weekends while attending tutorials or weekend workshops may arouse resentment. Even her need of the modest amounts of money required for fees, text books or fares may be made a source of difficulty where such money has to be provided by the husband. There is evidence to suggest that amongst mature age students returning to study, family and marital problems increase and that the need for counselling and support to minimise these difficulties is greater than currently acknowledged.

Finally, there is no doubt that a majority of mature age students returning to study succeed admirably. Even the little that is done by way of preparation and counselling is adequate. What may be more important is to identify those incoming students who could be characterised as high risk students and to provide additional support for them. If we could establish a profile which took account of:

- previous experience as a student
- family and occupational responsibilities and particularly family attitudes towards the student

- degree of independence of the student in respect to time, transport and money
- level and nature of motivation
- degree and nature of any handicap

it may be possible to identify high risk students and provide personal counselling as well as practical support.

In conclusion it must be reiterated that if universities are going to admit unqualified and inexperienced students they have a responsibility to provide whatever assistance is necessary to make sure that such students have at least an equal opportunity of succeeding. To do less than this can only reinforce the notion that such admissions may be popular today not because of concern for the individuals but rather to maintain the enrolment of the institution.

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